

Pedagogy:

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN FACT AND OPINION - "A ONE SIZE FITS ALL" PROCESS FOR GRADES 6 TO OAC

by Linda Mowat

I've hesitated for many years to write this article because so much of what is proposed here is the practical classroom distillation of someone else's work. However, it is also the single, most concrete, most useful thinking strategy I've field tested in my own classrooms over the last ten years. So - thank you Barry Beyer, author of Practical Strategies for the Teaching of Thinking (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987). This article, as well as my classroom practice, borrows heavily from your book.

The ability to distinguish between fact and opinion is a foundation skill for History. Like sand and mortar, with the building materials of just fact and opinion any student, Grade Ten Applied to OAC, can deconstruct someone else's analysis, pose thoughtful inquiry questions, and subsequently reconstruct his/ her own analysis.

This acquisition of the skill must be clearly identified to students as the objective of the lesson and then taught methodically and repeatedly until mastery of the skill is attained. A rule of thumb for students who don't grasp a skill easily, which is frequently the case, is to re-teach a skill as many as 12 times before admitting a student doesn't have the conceptual ability to master it. Although the process may

be used in any classroom, the pace, number of practice activities and complexity of content and application will vary

greatly. What follows is Beyer's recommended process as it is now taught in a Grade Ten Applied History classroom at Centre Wellington High School.

Students need to recognize the value of acquiring a skill before they are prepared to invest in learning it. To this end, two case studies are presented - that of psychologist Stanley Milgram's "electric shock" experiment and the Holocaust, both of which are sensational examples of how extremely badly members of our species will behave if they are manipulated by two powerful factors: the desire to belong to groups and both the fear and respect of authority. The ability to distinguish between fact and opinion is presented as a skill that can, if used vigilantly, protect against such manipulation.

BARRY BEYER'S CRITERIA

It is hot. (fact/ opinion)
It is 85 degrees centigrade. (fact)
This is a stinking sweat hole. (opinion)

FACT	OPINION
*precise	*subjective
*testable	*value laden
*no emotional adjectives	*emotionally laden adjectives
*certain	*uncertain

First, Beyer's criteria for distinguishing between fact and opinion is introduced. It is also posted on the classroom wall for repeated reference. The class then works through three example statements - only two of which are obviously either fact or opinion. The third example should be identified by the students as a "grey area", one



which would require judgement based on the context in which the phrase is originally found.

In order to build their confidence, students are then given a worksheet with a list of statements designed to be identified as fact or opinion and they are encouraged to defend their choices only by the criteria that is provided in the box above.

The more challenging identification comes when students are presented with a piece of real prose (at their reading level of course) and given colored highlighters to pick out the facts and the opinions. If students work in pairs, they are forcibly engaged in metacognition - talking about how they are thinking. Advise them that this is no longer a tidy, predictable school exercise. Often even within a single sentence there is a mix of both fact and opinion. Some further criteria in the box below will help them out, and should also be posted on the classroom walls for the duration of the course.

FACTS	OPINIONS
LOOK LIKE	LOOK LIKE
definitions	cause/ effect

examples	comparisons
details	explanations
	quality/attributes

Watch for this error; students will resort to using misleading criteria: the TRUTH! There is always someone who will quickly bluster, "That must be a fact because it's true." Be prepared to identify this as the snake in the Garden of Reason when it rears its inevitable head, and consider posing to the class the questions that follow:

- "Has anyone ever lied to you in order to convince you?"
- "Is it possible for a source to provide you with facts that are untrue?"
- "On the other hand, do you hold opinions that you are confident are true?"
- "Are there opinions your whole society believes to be true?"

This leads very nicely into a discussion about how in the world you do determine what is true when you might only be 15 years old and don't have a lifetime of experience and learning to draw on which in turn sets the stage for the introduction of further historical skills such as detecting bias and determining the credibility of any written source. However, these skills are hierarchical, dependent on the mastery of fact and opinion and the content of another article. Certainly Beyer provides strategies for them.

There are so many ways that students can apply their mastery of distinguishing between fact and opinion. It provides the building blocks for writing an opinion paragraph and a scholarly essay. A thesis then becomes readily identifiable to the students as a type of opinion statement with specific characteristics. Interpreting images becomes an easily managed process. First, students identify the visual

details of a cartoon, photograph, propaganda poster, or artist's painting. They then recognize how the artist has manipulated those details so that the viewer thinks about the opinion(s) suggested. Accurate referencing becomes straightforward to teach because borrowed opinions are quickly identified, and with a little knowledge students can determine which facts might be generally known, and which will require footnoting. All those complex cumulative activities that end a unit of study require the building blocks of fact and opinion.

In any classroom, abstract thought is best taught with a concrete process. In the Applied classroom, it is essential. Assuming the class moves back into a content unit after the thinking skill is introduced, students need to practice distinguishing between fact and opinion repeatedly. When questions are posed, both by the teacher and the student, it takes just a moment to reinforce fact/opinion. Consider with the class whether it asks for details or examples and is therefore a low level fact-type question, or for a comparison, cause/ effect, quality/ attribute or explanation, in which case it is a high level opinion question. Plan to have the students interview a living historical source in your classroom, and compose questions which

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knowingly balance low and high level inquiry. For example, "Would the routine of an average day as a merchant marine look like?" asks for factual details. "Why did you join up?" poses an explanation opinion question. In order for students to answer an opinion question, an opinion must, in return, be provided but students will also come to understand that no opinion should be seriously considered unless it is supported by a convincing fact base. The teacher can then introduce the writing of an opinion paragraph by providing an exemplar that students first decode by indicating which are the facts and which are the opinion statements. As students become confident with the skill, they are introduced to criteria used to rank the quality of opinion statements that a student might develop after being introduced to factual content.

- Is this an obvious opinion statement or argumentative?
- Would it take a complex arrangement of facts to support it or a simple and limited fact base?
- Is the wording in the opinion statement thoughtful and specific or is it vague and general?

Which is the more meaningful opinion statement—"Flying conditions for World War I flying aces were dangerous to the pilot's physical and mental health" or "World War I pilots had it bad"?

Students will learn to recognize the difference between a high quality fact which is precise and one which is

not even clearly a fact. "Heavy work such as paving roads and planting trees were required for 44 hours per week at relief camps during the Depression" is superior to "Many men in camps worked all day". Identify those words such as 'a lot', 'sometimes' that are intentionally vague and produce low quality facts.

It greatly aids the development of a complex skill such as this if everyone within a discipline, ideally in the whole school uses exactly the same vocabulary, which assists students in transferring the skill from one classroom to another. Although time must be invested initially to introduce this skill properly, there is a significant payoff once the student mastery of the skill increases. I have yet to devise a dramatic, artistic, or literary activity for students that packages their learning in a History classroom that does not start with an examination of fact and opinion. Ultimately students feel they have a defense, if they choose to use it, against passionately and impulsively embracing an opinion that is neither true nor just.